

BAHIA GRANDE CELEBRATION AND RESTORATION RESEARCH SUMMIT

Bahia Grande is an 11,000 acre estuary between Brownsville and Port Isabel in Cameron County, Texas. In the 1930s, the Port of Brownsville dredged the Brownsville ship channel, cutting off the tidal flow and changing a highly productive shallow-water system into a massive, salty, sand flat. As Bahia Grande dried up, it provided few ecological benefits, and its drifting sands caused numerous health problems in the Brownsville area. On 16 July 2005, local authorities opened a pilot channel between the Brownsville Ship Channel and Bahia Grande, reconnecting tidal flow to the area for the first time in seven decades. The pilot channel was only an initial step in restoring the degraded wetlands of Bahia Grande.



Heavy equipment opens the pilot channel in advance of Hurricane Emily, July 2005.

The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College hosted the Bahia Grande Pilot Channel Dedication and Restoration Research Summit on 19 September 2005. During the summit, NOAA

was represented by Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere Timothy Keeney and NOAA Restoration Center staff members, Stephanie Hunt and Kristopher Benson. Following the pilot channel dedication, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge manager John Wallace led an informative tour of the project site. Several dignitaries spoke during the restoration research summit, including Assistant Secretary Keeney, Congressman Solomon P. Ortiz, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Interior David P. Smith.

Hydrologic restoration of Bahia Grande will ultimately reconnect over 10,000 acres of the historically productive estuarine basins to the tidal influence of the lower Laguna Madre. The pilot channel, constructed in July, re-flooded the Bahia Grande basin, alleviating the health and industrial problems associated with dust blown from the dry basin. However, adequate tidal flushing of the system depends upon construction of additional channels. Funded by NOAA's Community-based Restoration Program and a multitude of partners, these channels will enhance water circulation throughout the basin and reestablish native mangrove stands and sea grass beds.



NOAA's Tim Keeney and Laguna Atascosa NWR Manager John Wallace survey the expanse of the recently re-flooded Bahia Grande.